

This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'



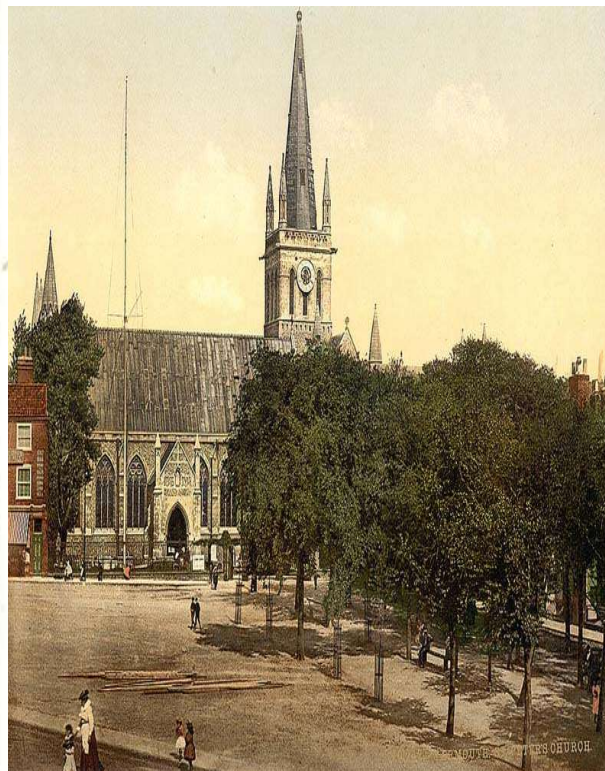
This story was created for International Day of the Girl, October 2023

Mary Ann Audley

Mary Ann Audley was born on 16 July 1845 in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk. She was the daughter of Samuel and Sarah Audley née Cundy; her father was a shoemaker. Mary Ann was baptised at Great Yarmouth on 13 September.



A Yarmouth Row



St. Nicholas', Great Yarmouth, Norfolk

When Mary Ann was five, her father died, at the age of thirty-eight, from hematemesis, which is the vomiting of blood. Her mother had given birth to a daughter, Sarah, two weeks earlier. Baby Sarah outlived her father by just two weeks. Later that spring, some of the family appear in the 1851 census, living at Row 27 in Yarmouth.

“Yarmouth was unique in that the passages to the houses behind the frontages which normally petered out into a garden, quite simply ran to join another passage made for the same purpose. This was the only way it could be done with such a limited space between the river and the sea. Yarmouth had three main streets, and from all of them the narrow passages led off to provide access to the dwellings of the poorer people. There were more houses than usual since there were so many people in such a small area. The passages in Yarmouth were longer than normal they became joined up and formed through passages which became known as Rows. Most of the rows were paved with pebbles from the beach which made them extremely difficult to walk on. A few were paved with flagstones, carts were not allowed to enter these and they were preferred by pedestrians.

It was not until 1804 that the Rows were given numbers. Up until then they were known by the more colourful people who lived in them, traders, public houses etc.. The highest Row number was 145. ‘Row’ is supposed to be derived from ‘Rhodio’, ‘to walk’, or from the Saxon ‘Rowa’ (a rank); or, which is more likely in the sense in which it was used in Yarmouth, from the French ‘rue’, a street or a lane. To get people and provisions around the Rows a special troll cart was used; 12 feet long, with 2 wheels revolving on a box axle placed under the sledge, the extreme width of the vehicle being about 3 feet 6 inches. They

had a very short, low back axle and the wheels ran under the body of the carriage. When they were not in use they could be tipped up on end and then used up very little space. These carts were modelled almost after the chariots of the Roman Invaders. If two carts met, one of the two had to back off! There were a great many of these carts carrying goods to and from the shipping, and around the town. The brewers had a longer version and those for carrying people were much lighter than the work cart.”¹

In 1851, we find the newly widowed Sarah working as a power loom weaver, so at least she had some kind of income to support her family. Ten years previously, the census specified that Sarah was a silk weaver. She probably worked for Grout’s textile mill, who were a major employer in Yarmouth.

“Grout’s silk factory or textile mill at Great Yarmouth was founded in Norwich in 1806 to 1807 by brothers, George and Joseph Grout, and their partner, John Bayliss, to manufacture black silk crepe. The material, at that time, was used exclusively by royalty and the aristocracy and had to be imported from Italy. English manufacturers had been trying unsuccessfully for 200 years to make it. John Bayliss was in charge of the process. We know little about him and we still do not know how he worked out the process. The first factory was run by George Grout in Norwich, while Joseph ran the financial and sales from London. Bayliss built a dyeing and finishing works in Enfield, Middlesex. They registered their company as Grout, Bayliss, Makers of Black Mourning Crepe. The firm expanded into Great Yarmouth sometime between

¹ The Rows of Yarmouth www.paulinedodd.com/rows.htm accessed February 2011.

1807 to 1815, first on a site on North Quay and then, by the end of the Napoleonic War, at a site on the former barracks on St. Nicholas Road. The first reference to the Great Yarmouth factory is in Palmer's Perlustration, where it is stated that the company had a small factory within the North Gate. In 1832, at a parliamentary enquiry into the British silk industry, the employment of children was a concern, and Joseph Grout said that the shortage of children limited the extent of his works. Children aged between nine and twelve years of age soon became accustomed to the employment discipline of a silk mill. There would have been many children in Great Yarmouth who filled Grout's requirements and there was no other textiles competition in the town. Wages were low, but would have been of help to the town's poor families.

Raw silk was imported from India, Italy and China. It was soaked, sorted and divided according to quality. After sorting it was wound. In 1851, there were about 80 women engaged in this task, each earning four to six shillings a week. The wound silk was then thrown or twisted. Forty females did this work, many less than eleven years old, earning between two shillings and sixpence and seven shillings and sixpence a week. The silk was wound from larger to smaller bobbins, making the warpers' job easier. At Grout's this was done by steam power. The silks were now ready for weaving by older girls in the weaving house. The winding, throwing and weaving were all done by machine. The woven silk was then crimped and dyed, producing the crepe."²

² Grout's Textile Mill www.blue-plaques.co.uk/blue_plaques/view/51
accessed 21 June 2023.

With Sarah in 1851 were her eldest and youngest surviving daughters, Elizabeth and Sarah and two sons, Edward and Samuel. Sarah's first three children, a son and twin boys, had died in infancy. There is no sign of Mary Ann anywhere. She is not with her maternal grandparents, or with her widowed paternal grandfather. In her grief, had Sarah just missed Mary Ann out, or was she elsewhere with details that are so far from the truth that she cannot be found in a countrywide search?

Sarah spent the rest of her life living in Yarmouth, dying there in 1893 but the story now focusses on her eldest daughter, Elizabeth. Elizabeth was born in 1838. At thirteen, she was listed as being 'at home' in the 1851 census. Presumably she had charge of her younger siblings enabling her mother to work. On 3 June 1855, when she was about seventeen, Elizabeth married George Shires, a mariner, at St. George in the East, in the Poplar district of East London. The railway had arrived in Yarmouth in the 1840s, although there was no direct line to London; was this Elizabeth's means of escape, or did George's occupation take him to Yarmouth? On the marriage record, both George and Elizabeth claimed to be living a 2 Lower Chapman Street.

Whether or not Mary Ann travelled to London with Elizabeth, or followed on later, is unknown but in the 1861 census they can be found living together at 10 Everard Street, St. George in the East. Everard Street is coloured blue on Charles Booths poverty map. Although not the lowest classification, the inhabitants are described as 'very poor, casual. Chronic want'. Whereas Lower Chapman Street, where Elizabeth was living on marriage, was classified as 'Fairly comfortable. Good ordinary earnings.'³ Although Elizabeth appears as

³ Charles Booth's Poverty Maps <https://booth.lse.ac.uk/> accessed 15 July 2023.

married and with the name Shires, there is no sign of George, perhaps not surprisingly, if he was a mariner. Both Elizabeth and Mary Ann, who was then aged fifteen, were described as prostitutes. Henry Mayhew, compiling information that would, in 1851, be published as *London Labour and the London Poor*, estimated that there were 80,000 prostitutes in London at this time. In the 1861 census for England and Wales, there are 683 individuals whose stated occupation was that of a prostitute. It is unusual that women would self-identify in this way. Many thousands would be disguised as laundresses, dressmakers and domestic servants. It is usually those in institutions who are labelled as prostitutes by the authorities. In the case of Mary Ann and Elizabeth, they presumably gave this information to the enumerator, or he made that judgement. Elizabeth signed her marriage certificate with a confident hand, so it is likely that she filled in the census form herself. Everard Street, where they were living, is in the area that was, thirty years later, to become the stomping ground of Jack the Ripper. Of the twenty six houses in Everard Street, eleven contained prostitutes; several were, like Mary Ann and Elizabeth, from Yarmouth. There were more prostitutes in the surrounding streets. Was this Elizabeth's trade before her marriage? It seems unlikely, given her address at that time. Had she turned to this way of life because she was not receiving any support from the absent George? Does the fact that there were several girls from Great Yarmouth suggest that they had been procured by a ring?

Societal attitudes regarded the men who used the services of prostitutes benignly; sexual continence was, it was believed, harmful to men's health. They were, it was thought, merely finding a necessary outlet for their natural urges and thereby sparing their wives. The double standards of the time meant

that the women and girls who provided these services were condemned and vilified. As a young girl, Mary Ann would have been particularly prized, not just because of her youth but because she was less likely to be diseased. We might be shocked that Mary Ann was a prostitute at the age of fifteen but it is important to remember that girls of twelve could legally marry until as recently as 1929. At odds with the law governing marriageable age, was the raising of the age of consent from twelve to thirteen in 1875 and to sixteen, ten years later.

Elizabeth and Mary Ann are elusive. There are no newspaper reports, or other records, that indicate that either of them were arrested for prostitution. A series of Contagious Diseases Acts were passed in the 1860s, following concerns at high levels of sexually transmitted infections amongst the armed forces. The prevalence of syphilis at this time is borne out by looking at service records. Initially, the police had the right to arrest women found near barracks and in ports but later the jurisdiction was extended. These women were subjected to compulsory examination and those infected were forcibly hospitalised in 'Lock Hospitals', or if these were full, workhouse infirmaries, for a period of between three months and a year. It is possible that workhouse admissions' registers may allude to the reason for their admission. Those who refused to be examined could be sentenced to imprisonment, often with hard labour. These acts also impacted on women who were not prostitutes but who were in the wrong place at the wrong time; it should not be assumed that all those held under the Contagious Diseases Acts were prostituting themselves. Not infrequently, married women who were entirely faithful became infected with venereal disease because of their husband's behaviour. The impact on women who were not prostitutes was one reason why there were many

protests against these acts. Another bone of contention was the fact that no checks were made on the male clients. Eventually, campaigns led by social reformer Josephine Butler and others involved in the fight for women's suffrage, led to the acts' repeal.

It was Josephine Butler, who had been largely responsible for the raising of the age of consent. Whilst conducting her campaign to have the Contagious Diseases Acts repealed,



she was appalled by how young some of the girls were. Together with William Thomas Stead, the editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, she set out to expose the scandal of child prostitution. Stead purchased a thirteen year old girl from her mother for £5 and the subsequent outcry led to the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, raising the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen and brought in measures to prevent child prostitution. It became illegal to procure a girl under the age of eighteen for the purposes of prostitution and obtaining a prostitute by intimidation, fraud or the administering of drugs was also outlawed.

It may be that Mary and Ann Elizabeth's careers as prostitutes were short-lived. In 1863, Elizabeth, described as a widow, married for a second time, to Thomas Aldred, or Aldridge, a Thames waterman. This was a route to

respectability. They settled in Rotherhithe and ran a grocery, before moving back to Yarmouth, where they can be found in the 1901 census.

Mary Ann too seems to have had a settled future. By 1871 she had returned to Yarmouth and was living in Row 40 as the wife of James Symonds, a fish merchant, who was also from Yarmouth. James Symonds also went by the surname Tooley and it is as Tooley that the birth of their daughter, Jane Elizabeth, was registered in Yarmouth, in 1866. Their son James, who had been born as Tooley in 1868, was with his paternal grandparents in Yarmouth in 1871. In fact, although they are claiming to be man and wife in 1871, James and Mary Ann didn't marry until 1872. They appear to have lived uneventfully in Yarmouth until their deaths, James in 1902 and Mary Ann in 1907. Unusually though, neither of their children were with James and Mary Ann in 1881. Twelve year old James was visiting in Rotherhithe and Jane cannot be found. Both children later married and had families in Yarmouth, although it seems that James later deserted his wife and children and had another family in Swindon.

Perhaps unusually, given that her daughter was living locally at the time, when Mary Ann died, a notice in the *Yarmouth Independent* requested that anyone with an interest in her estate should come forward. This is definitely our Mary Ann, as it mentions the

**Mrs. MARY ANN SYMONDS,
Deceased.**

ALL PERSONS having CLAIMS against the Estate of MARY ANN SYMONDS, late of 34, St. Mary's Road, Southtown, and formerly of 17, Mariners' Road, Great Yarmouth, widow, deceased, are required forthwith to send particulars. AND all persons indebted to the said deceased are requested to pay such debts to me, ARTHUR E. COWL, 14, South Quay, Great Yarmouth, Solicitor for the Executors.

address where she was living in 1901. Despite the notice mentioning executors, no will or letters of administration have been found. Were there perhaps complications because the children were registered as Tooley?

In fact very little can be found about Mary Ann herself but her life can be set within the context of the times.

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Small sections of this story are taken from the author's book *Tracing your Marginalised Ancestors Pen and Sword* (2024)

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